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AUTHOR Ledezma, Melissa L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests strategies for helping children understand death. The early experiences of childhood build the foundation on which the child establishes a healthy orientation towards life and living. Grieving parents are often so upset by their own loss that they do not carefully explain death to their children. Parents may feel that the child is too young or that they are protecting the child from grief, but the child ends up confused and unsure about death and dying. Although children frequently see people and animals dying in the movies and television, death is not an easy thing for a child to understand. Parents or guardians should be honest and open about death and receptive to a child's questions. Children should know that it is okay to cry and parents must realize that children of different ages interpret death in various ways. The death of a sibling is presented here as especially difficult for children to understand. They may resent their parents for not preventing the death or they may feel guilt themselves and that they somehow contributed to their brother's or sister's dying. A parent's death may also instill great anxiety about who will take care of the child. Death is often associated with the elderly. Unexpected deaths particularly leave children confused and angry. Therefore, open discussions rather than attempts to hide reality are necessary to help children cope with death. (RJM)

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Dying and Death: Helping Children Cope

Melissa L. Ledezma

Eastern New Mexico University

Running head: DYING AND DEATH

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Abstract

Death is an experience everyone in life will face at one time. This paper discusses dying and death. The main emphasis will be on how to help a child cope when they lose a pet, sibling, or parent.

Dying and Death: Helping Children Cope

Death is the permanent cessation of all functions. It is the final stage of life. A stage in which everyone, everywhere, will one day experience. Even though death is an inevitable part of life, many people feel uneasy discussing the event.

Though no one will escape death many tend to think death is something that will happen to others, not to the ones they love or themselves. Unfortunately this is rarely, if ever, the case. Many children lose a pet, family friend, sibling or parent as they are growing up. They are often ill prepared for death because many parents feel uncomfortable thinking about death, much less discussing it. This uncomfortableness often affects the way children learn about, and cope with death.

The early experiences of childhood determine how the child will feel about his/her self and the world. As coping with loss affects capacity for intimate relationships, early experiences are the foundation on which the child builds a healthy orientation toward life and living (Wolfelt, 1983). The ability of

parents to be sensitive and understanding of a child's needs when a death occurs can make the difference in making the experience either harmful, or helpful, to a child's emotional growth.

When a death occurs, grieving parents are often so upset by their own loss, that they do not effectively explain what has happened to their children. Children are left confused and unsure of what is going on around them. Often times parents feel the child is not old enough to fully understand what is happening so they try to shield him or her from the grieving process. There is disagreement among psychoanalysts as to the ability to mourn in childhood. Probably this disagreement has to do with come confusion of the affects of mourning: grief, sadness, depressive feelings, anger, and anxiety (Altschul, 1974).

Attempting to protect the child from the facts of death is a futile exercise. In addition to their real life experiences with dead animals, children observe death on television news and inordinate amounts of fictional death in movies and television plays (Stillion, 1979 & Wass, 1979). Instead of trying to

shield a child from death, parents need to be open, caring and supportive. Parents need to answer the questions a child asks as honestly as possible. This helps a child better understand and cope with dying and death.

Children interpret death differently at different stages of their lives. When a child is between the ages of 3 to 5, death is viewed as temporary. The person who has died is capable of returning. Death is not considered to be universal. Children tend to believe only the old will die (Sims, 1990). And lastly, there is a fear of separation. Children often begin to wonder who will take care of them once the loved one is gone.

Children between the ages of 5 to 9, personify death. Death is the "bogey man" who comes to take them away if they are bad. Death is a catastrophic, powerful force which picks out who its next victim will be. Death is viewed as being unfair (Sims, 1990). For example, death can be avoided, if you are good. Death is never seen as universal, but more in the sense of that they will not die.

Children, ages 9 to 12, begin to see death as a permanent, personal and universal force. They begin to realize that everyone will die some day. They often become fascinated by the morbid details of death (Sims, 1990). They want to hear the exact details of death; i.e., was it horrible, was there blood and guts everywhere?

In early adolescence, death is seen as something fearful, yet fascinating. Death is seen as an enemy which tests the limits of life. The adolescent tends to have a more adult understanding of death.

Quite often, losing a pet is a child's first death experience. The pet may be old and in pain or die when hit by a car. Either way, the death may be traumatic to the child. When helping a child grieve for the loss of a pet, try to be honest and open about death. Do not tell the child the pet is being "put to sleep". Explain that the pet is hurting and this is best to end his/her suffering. By implying a pet is being "put to sleep" a child might become scared of sleeping for fear they may not wake up either. When possible, try to give a little funeral for the pet. This offers the

child a time to say goodbye to their trusted pal, allowing them a time to grieve.

The dying or death of a sibling is another experience a child may have to go through while growing up. Whether a sibling has a terminal disease or dies suddenly, children face intense emotions. A sudden violent death is more difficult to cope with than an anticipated non-violent death (Lord, 1990). Like adults children tend to have a hard time excepting a sudden violent death of a loved one. They are unprepared for the feelings they have to face. Children are not miniature adults. They have their own way of understanding death, much of which is determined by age (Lord, 1990).

If a child has emotional difficulties before the death of a sibling, and/or if the family is marked by marital discord, the child may be more vulnerable to long-term effects of the trauma. If a child's brother or sister is killed at a time when the relationship was troubled, as is sometimes the case in sibling rivalry, the death may be difficult to handle (Lord, 1990).

When growing up, siblings tend to spend a great amount of time together. This time can be spent playing together, arguing with one another or even sharing the same room. When one of the siblings dies, there is an empty space where the brother or sister once was. The child may feel alone, confused, even angry. All of these feelings are normal. The grieving process for a surviving brother or sister is, in many ways, like that of a parent, but there are some differences (Schiff, 1978).

Children tend to feel guilty while parents tend to feel powerless. The child seems to believe that if they had done something different perhaps the sibling would not have died (Schiff, 1978). For example, they might had been nicer, shared their toys or not said those mean things to their brother or sister. Parents tend to feel an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness. Somehow they, as parents, were unable to protect and/or save their child. There is also the devastating reality that through some accident of nature they have outlived a child.

If a sibling is terminally ill, the child has a longer amount of time to deal with the reality of the upcoming death. Some of the common feelings siblings struggle with are sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt, jealousy, rejection, loneliness and isolation (Deveau, 1990). Children tend to become sad even before the sibling dies. They grieve for the dying child, for themselves and all the changes about to occur in their lives. The child may become anxious about the death of their sibling. The child often becomes afraid that their sibling may die while they are caring for them. Or worse, the sibling may die then the child is gone; i.e., at school or in the bathroom. The child begins to become anxious about their own death and the death of their parents.

The child may become angry that this is happening to someone they love. The child may resent parents for their inability to stop their sibling's dying and make it go away. Often times they are mad at everyone and anyone, no one understands what their life has become and no one can make the pain stop.

The child is often plagued with grief. Maybe they could have done something to prevent this or perhaps they should be suffering as well. A child whose sibling was hurt in an accident where the child was present may feel guilty for living and not being injured. They may grieve for the death they themselves almost faced.

A child may become jealous of all the attention the dying child is receiving. This is often followed by the feeling of rejection. The child feels that no one will pay attention to them and give them the love and attention they once got and deserved.

Lastly, loneliness and isolation may occur. If parents are busy dealing with the dying sibling, or handling funeral arrangements for the deceased sibling, the remaining children may feel lonely and isolated from everyone. Often times people do not know how to talk to the remaining child. Therefore, the child misses out on the support system that they so desperately need.

The dying or death of a parent is another tragic experience a child may face. If the parent is

extremely ill, the child may be slightly prepared for the end to come. The bereaved are sometimes better prepared for the death of a parent, if the parent appears to be ready and prepared for death. When death has been openly discussed in the family, perhaps even burial plans and arrangements made, there appears to be less trauma for the survivors (Sanders, 1989). Yet even though death is expected for the ailing parent, when a parent dies, an intense death anxiety accompanies the reaction. There is a feeling of complete loss. A feeling of complete aloneness which no one can replace. Death of a parent is often harder on a small or young child than an adult child. The younger the child, the more dependent they tend to be on the parents. When a parent dies this dependency is replaced with anxiety and fear. "Who will take care of me now that my mom is gone?" is a common fear. There is also a great fear of losing someone else. "Will my dad be next; my sister; my brother; me?"

Death is a natural part of life. Children even when they are young need to be prepared for the possibility of death and dying. Even though it is not

a topic most people wish to discuss, it is a fact of life and children are done a great injustice when they are not given the facts. The topic of death should be included in the curricula or schools at all levels. Libraries in schools should become more aware of the literature on death-related themes and make sure materials available to teachers and students (Guy, 1993). After all, parents and teachers teach them their ABC's and 123's. They teach children why grass is green and where babies come from. Should they not teach them the one thing that is inevitable in life? Death is the one stage that the child will have to go through at one time or another.

According to Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) there are five stages a person goes through during the process of coping with death. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression (reactive or preparatory), and acceptance. It is the belief of this researcher not only are these stages true for the dying, but also for the families and friends left behind. Not every adult will go through each part of the stages in order. Children are no different. Children need time to

understand what is happening around them. For example, why everyone is so sad or why mom and dad are crying.

CONCLUSION

Death is never an easy thing for a child to go through. Being honest and open with the child is the best help a person can give. Letting them know it is okay to grieve. It is okay to cry, they do not have to be the strong one. Answering their questions of why has happened and where exactly pet, sibling, mom or dad went. Many young children are confused and easily upset from a death-related experience and require additional support to answer their questions. Therefore, open discussions rather than "hush-hush" attitudes (e.g., the death of a goldfish, brother, cat, father, grandmother, or friend) must come from parents or guardians (Guy, 1993).

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